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### Morphing Bodies: Strategies of Embodiment in Contemporary US Cultural Practices

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Symposium organized by Agnès Derail (ENS, Département Littératures) and Cécile Roudeau (LARCA, Université Paris Diderot). February 9-10, 2018 - École normale supérieure (Ulm)

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# Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass

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## Friday, February 9, 2018 (1-5pm)

(authors: **Lucas Person** et **Alexandra Tsovmā**, students at ENS)

- 1 “The self-proclaimed loafing poet worked a lot to survive,” said **Peter RILEY (Keynote Speaker)**, Lecturer in American Literature, University of Exeter) as an introduction to his lecture on Whitman and the working world: “Wet Paper Between Us’: Whitman, Intimacy, and the Transformations of Labor”. In this first keynote presentation, Peter Riley skilfully explored the links between Walt Whitman’s poetry and his relationship with work, both concrete and abstract, with bodies at work, and the often-erotic physicality of producing objects or poetry. A detailed knowledge and analysis of Whitman’s biography and manuscripts effectively shows the poet’s conflicted thoughts on the political and social issues of his time, both present and sometimes mysteriously absent from *Leaves of Grass*. Peter Riley reminds us that Whitman was involved in intense estate speculation in 1854-1855, even speculating on his own house six weeks before the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*. Reading Whitman from the perspective of economics allows Peter Riley to revisit poems such as “Chants Democratic” as a renewal of the notion of contract, no longer based on preconceived decorum and abstract fixed value but on a one to one agreement. The analysis of “Carol of Occupations” was particularly convincing. Riley showed that Whitman was neither on the side of the mercantile capitalist, of the American “laissez-faire,” nor versed in any kind of left-wing reaction—but rather stood in between, in the very wet press, “chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us.” The poem in that sense expresses a frantic effort to establish a contact with the reader right through the page. A stimulating challenge to the potentially simplistic vision one might have of Whitman as a “progressive” spirit only,

who consistently lived out his ideals—we find instead a very human being, full of internal debates, singular and yet a man of his time.

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- 2 The following three presentations were grouped thematically in the panel “Dance, Rhythms, and Rhymes,” chaired by **Thomas CONSTANTINESCO**, Assistant professor at Université Paris Diderot.
- 3 In a talk entitled “Whitman’s Fitful Rhythms,” **Lacy RUMSEY** (Assistant professor at ENS Lyon) offered, an in-depth analysis of Whitman’s work on rhythm and prosody: while this is not always obvious at first sight, the poems of *Leaves of Grass* are extremely crafted (in a very architectural sense) and their rhythm carefully thought out. After first defining rhythm in poetry and, more precisely, rhythm in Whitman’s poetry, Dr. Rumsey showed just how novel this poet’s approach was, yet far removed from snobbishness and inaccessibility: Whitman’s take on rhythm is one that frees rather than alienates the reader.
- 4 Echoing the first foray into bodies and physicality in Whitman’s poetry in a paper entitled “Walt Whitman and Dance, Embodying America,” **Adeline CHEVRIER-BOSSEAU** (Assistant professor at Université Clermont Auvergne) showed a parallel between the “democratic” representation of bodies in *Leaves of Grass* and the innovations in dance inspired by Whitman’s poetry (dancer Isadora Duncan herself claimed to be his spiritual daughter). Not unlike modern dance that unashamedly celebrated the human body, Whitman’s “American song” materialises the body via the vocal chords. Both inhabit another individual’s body for the duration of the performance or reading. The biographical link between Walt Whitman and the committed movement of Social Dance was replaced in the context of Whitman’s affinity to the working class: social dance was thus a way for him to celebrate male dancers and virility as opposed to the bourgeois representation of the body. Dance in Whitman may thus be construed as another facet of homoerotic experience.
- 5 **Andrew EASTMAN** (Assistant professor at Université de Strasbourg) could unfortunately not be present at the symposium, but his paper, “Whitman’s Rhyme,” was read by Thomas Constantinesco. An interesting pendant to the exploration of Whitman’s rhythm by Dr. Rumsey, this presentation stated that abandoning both meter and rhyme was at least as much a poetic as a political process. Seeking to liberate and directly address the reader, his rhyme (or lack thereof) is a political stance that allows him to “talk” to the reader as an equal in what appears to be everyday language. Beyond that, Dr. Eastman explored Whitman’s metaphysical conception of this unorthodox rhyme as something organic and essential to poetry, as exemplified by the famous line “and that a kelson of the creation is love” which draws closer ships and theology. Dr. Constantinesco’s remark on this point led to a stimulating debate: according to him, the Whitmanian poem cannot be an echo of Nature—for that would place it outside Nature, whereas the internal rhythms partake of Nature.

## Saturday, February 10 (9am-12pm)

(author: **Michel Imbert**, Assistant professor at Université Paris Diderot)

- 6 The three following talks were presented in a session called “Whitman and the West,” chaired by **Bruno MONFORT**, Professor at Université Paris Nanterre.
- 7 **Mark NIEMEYER**, Professor at the Université de Bourgogne, gave a paper entitled “‘unlimn’d they disappear’: The Ghostly Presence of Native Americans in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*,” which analyzed the poet’s portrayal of America’s aboriginal peoples. As the paper demonstrated, though references to Native Americans are actually relatively frequent in Whitman, their presence tends to be “ghostly.” One of the reasons for this is that Whitman, like many of his fellow nineteenth-century Americans, subscribed to the myth of the “Vanishing Indian,” which saw the country’s indigenous population as regrettably, though inevitably, disappearing. Many of the images of Indians in *Leaves of Grass*, in fact, are vague, shadowy and marginal, endowed with a spectral quality. In other cases, Indian names tend to be reified, suggesting that all that is left of Native Americans is, in fact, their names and fragments of their languages. While Whitman’s portrayal of Native Americans, which clearly formed part of his nationalistic program to help create a distinctively American literature and language, can—and indeed has been—criticized, it can nonetheless be seen as part of a more general strategy of using a multitude of images and names of American peoples, places and things as building blocks to construct his great epic, which he once compared to a cathedral; they are pieces of a unified, national whole, which for Whitman was always greater than the sum of its parts.
- 8 In his paper entitled “Walt Whitman’s Wild West Show: ‘Italian Music in Dakota,’” **Benoît TADIÉ** (Professor at the Université Rennes 2) analyses Whitman’s poem “Italian Music in Dakota” as an instance of colonialism working through, and disguised as, culture. Its apparently harmonious transplanting of Eastern culture into Dakota Territory conceals a symmetrical transfer of the Native Americans out of the same Territory, a process which becomes more obvious when one reads the poem’s loaded signifiers against the historical background of Indian Wars and white settlement in Dakota. The poem’s deterritorializing logic may be compared to Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, which deracinates the “Indian problem” in a similar way: both cultural enterprises belong to the same nascent stage of the society of the spectacle, in which colonial history, apparently stripped of its violence, is reconfigured as a form of entertainment.
- 9 The last communication of this panel, by **Delphine RUMEAU**, Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, was titled “Walt Whitman, un primitif ?”
- 10 Whitman se pose en barde primitif dans *Feuilles d’herbe*. Partant de ce constat, la communication a d’abord déployé ce que recouvre ce « primitif », dont les incarnations peuvent parfois sembler contradictoire : « biblique », « indien », « Grec », « barbare ». D. Rumeau s’est ensuite surtout concentrée sur ces deux derniers termes, et a montré à quel point la posture primitive est construite chez Whitman et doit être située dans le discours de la Renaissance américaine, avant de se tourner vers la première réception européenne, à la Belle Époque, qui, elle, a insisté sur la catégorie du « barbare » en l’investissant à son tour de sens pluriels.

## Keynote Speaker : Pierre-Yves PÉTILLON (Professor Emeritus at Sorbonne Université): “Walt, sa mascarade”

- 11 « Songs of Myself » célèbre d’abord, sur le mode épique, l’expansion d’un moi qui se donne en spectacle et enflé démesurément jusqu’à englober en lui-même une multitude d’avatars ; le poème relate comment le continent américain et le vaste « Kosmos » lui sont co-extensifs, *ab origine*, depuis l’origine. *Leaves of Grass* est la geste de leur genèse conjointe. Moi, je, et, de proche en proche, en moi-même, en puissance, tout l’univers. Pierre-Yves Pétillon perçoit dans ce ton fanfaron des accents de *tall-tales* à la Davy Crockett. Whitman prétend faire jaillir le soleil de lui-même (« now and always send a sunrise out of me ») et régénérer symboliquement l’Amérique originelle en tentant d’en revenir, à la source, au son de sa propre voix qu’il s’efforce de capter. Simple souffle, elle s’élève jusqu’à laisser percer le cri barbare qui l’extirpe de la gangue de la langue ordinaire. : « I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world ». Tel l’épervier ocelé qui s’envole, « je » m’arrache au poids du passé. Puis vient le moment, où tout s’effondre et se disloque. Le comédien-caméléon qui ne cessait de s’esquiver au gré de ses incarnations successives finit par s’observer à distance et constate qu’il n’en finit pas de se dérober. « I too am untranslatable » prend alors une tonalité désabusée. Comme dans « Prayer of Columbus », le « je » est échoué sur le rivage et entend le continent qui lui fait signe et l’appelle mais ce ne sont plus que des signes fugaces, énigmatiques qui ont l’air de se moquer de lui « Dim ever-shifting guesses of it spread before me, // Of newer better worlds, their mighty parturition, // Mocking, perplexing me ». Sur le littoral, en marge de l’Amérique, il n’est plus qu’une épave, emportée par les flots. *Leaves of Grass* est rythmé par cette oscillation : une phase d’expansion-dilatation, puis l’implosion-rétraction du moi solaire qui s’efface.

## Saturday, February 10 (2-5pm)

(authors: **Frédéric Ache**, Master student at ENS, and **Lucas Person**, student at ENS)

- 12 This session was titled “rebellious, political Whitman” and was chaired by **Hélène AJI**, Professor at Université Paris Nanterre.
- 13 **Marie-Christine LEMARDELEY-CUNCI** (Professor at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle) argued that Whitman’s melancholy could be traced back to the very first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Pr. Lemardeley explained that she had first come to Whitman through counter-culture poet Allen Ginsberg, but she soon grew aware that there was more to it than a self-assertive poetry of liberation. Bleakness and melancholy were there from the beginning, as were couples of contraries, such as life and death, presence and absence, creation and putrefaction. Far from marking a turning point, the Civil War was less the source than the reminder of an original trauma. Since melancholy stands for an irrevocable loss, self-assertion is not possible without a grieving, mourning process. Marie-Christine Lemardeley drew our attention to the fact that both political and personal troubles are evoked through the prism of foreign, often French, words: *mélange* for the Revolution’s upheaval, *ennui* for melancholy. Though Whitman’s poetry is often said to be inclusive, it is remarkable that there are no *real* descriptions, that poems are more maps than topography, that the poet provides us with lists (of places where he has often never set foot) in order to avoid description. “I too am untranslatable”: Marie-

Christine Lemardeley's Whitman is not to be read as a monument to American democracy but as an event containing the impossibility of its own translation, even of its own summary—a new, subversive Declaration of Independence. From this perspective, melancholy in *Leaves of Grass* is the perfect example of Sigmund Freud's *Sehnsucht*, a desire or nostalgia for something one knows has been lost whilst not knowing what it is.

- 14 **Isabelle ALFANDARY** (Professor at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle)'s paper entitled "Poésie et démocratie chez Walt Whitman" took a different view from the previous contribution. Through an analysis of *Democratic Vistas* and of the political implications of *Leaves of Grass*, Pr. Alfandary made a powerful case to read Whitman's works as a celebration of American democracy: "O Democracy, to serve you, *ma femme*." America and democracy are interchangeable words, according to Whitman.
- 15 The multiplicity of voices in *Leaves of Grass* ("I contain multitudes") was thus read as a proto-Derridean distinction between the "mad voices" of the feudal world and the mingled voices of the democratic multitude. The poet appears as the only true embodiment of democracy, allowing for the diversity of American voices to emerge. For Whitman, as for Derrida, then, literature intimately partakes of democracy. Pr. Alfandary then convincingly analysed the title of the essay: the word *vista* is indeed neither a metaphor nor a catachresis. The figurative sense comes second: a *vista* being both a corridor and an optical device, it opens the reader's eyes and makes them see the United States from a panoramic viewpoint. The nation's unity, then, may be read as a synthesis of the different individuals' identities that are mingled without being annihilated. The poet sings a polyphonic monody where one persona assumes all voices and, embodying the people with whom he is equal, talks from an immanent standpoint. The voice of the poet should consequently be as attentive as possible to the voiceless, namely women, slaves and minorities. *Democratic Vistas* can thus be understood as a synecdoche to point to the democracy to come. This lecture triggered several questions from the floor, especially about the critical distance that, according to some readers, sometimes surfaces in Whitman's writings. Containing multitudes might also express a wish to "contain," to control the democratic mob.
- 16 In her exposé entitled "The Plural of Us: from Assemblage to Assembly in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*," **Juliette UTARD** (Assistant professor at Sorbonne Université) proposed to interrogate the links between the lyrical subject of poetry ("I") and the democratic "we". Whom does the poet speak of when he says "'we'"? What about those excluded from this "we"? What are the political implications on democracy and citizenship? *Leaves of Grass* may be read as an assemblage, a collage, a herbarium, both from the point of view of its title and for the diversity of its voices and themes. And yet, as Dr. Utard underscored, the plural ("we" or "us") appears considerably less than the ubiquitous "I". Why? She proposed that the "I" already contains the plurality of a "we," since it is both subject and object. Most often, the pronoun "we" stands for "the two of us," either designating a homoerotic pairing or including nature itself. "We," in that sense, asserts a conception of living things in which each individual is different, albeit identical to the other. Besides, the plural may also serve to name the relationship between the poet and his work, as appears for instance in a series of expressions like "my book and I," "me and mine." Poems are similar to collections of flowers or of leaves. Whitman was aware that such words as "plucking," "sampling" or "collecting" applied equally to poetry as to natural collections. The practice of assemblage leads to a political assembly where unity is dynamic and multiple, as that of a musical choir. Thus, the 52 sections of "Song of Myself"

can be seen as a poetic re-writing of the 52 words of the Preamble to the American Constitution. Whitman crafts an assembly where every poem is both a singular work of art and to be read in the context of a whole collection. Similarly, the “we” that is the subject of both politics and poetry remains always indefinite: it is a collective shape bringing together individuals without imposing a definite essence to an always-evolving subject.

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